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ABSTRACT

The study described here concerned the perceptions of White college students in a college of education about the educational, professional, and social status of speakers of Black English. The subjects were 46 students in two undergraduate classes in communication disorders. Each class was presented with a different recording of a passage about a grandfather, one version spoken in Black English and the other spoken in standard English. The students then responded immediately to a semantic differential scale composed of 10 statements alluding to the speaker's educational, professional, economic, and social credibility. Results indicated that the standard English speaker scored higher on all 10 statements on the semantic differential scale, strongly supporting the commonly-held idea that most standard-English-speaking teachers prefer similar speech behavior from their students and that standard English usage is equated with being well educated. It is recommended that increased efforts be made to educate future teachers in the complexities of language and linguistic variation, lessening linguistic prejudices toward Black English. (MSE)

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WHITE STUDENTS' JUDGMENTS OF EDUCATION AND SOCIAL MOBILITY OF BLACK ENGLISH SPEAKERS

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Black Americans, as one dimension of cultural diversity, have generated much interest and a plethora of terms descriptive of their language behavior. The following are terms commonly used to denote a specific form of English used almost exclusively by eighty percent of Black Americans (17,18,19): Black English, Black Nonstandard English, Black English Vernacular, Black Dialect, and Ebonics. Despite the variance in terminology, the terms basically refer to the same linguistic phenomenon. Although the linguistic system varies in some phonological, morphological, and semantic rules which identify its speakers as Black, 19% of these speakers use speech not distinguishable from the English spoken by the majority of White middle-class Americans (19). The term "Standard" has been ascribed to the English spoken by the majority of Americans who are White and middle-class. Standard English is also synonymous with Mainstream American English and Network English--all terms used to describe the English most accepted in the American educational system. "Nonstandard" is a broad term used to define the language behavior used by any subculture, regardless of race.

For purposes of simplicity, the term Nonstandard will be used to designate speech that is not Standard, and Black English to designate a specific form of Nonstandard English. The two terms will be used interchangeably throughout this paper.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which the users of nonstandard speech, especially Black English,

receive negative perceptions from others regarding their speech. This study will be limited to the perceptions white college-age students have regarding the educational, professional, and social credibility of Black English speakers. Although it has been established that Black English is a creditable, rule-governed, linguistic system, its speakers clearly feel stigmatized by its use in the classroom situation. This has been the traditional experience in the field of education where it has been demonstrated that students who use Black English have often been perceived as less intelligent based on their nonstandard speech. There is no lack of information throughout the literature documenting the fact that any minority group is at a severe disadvantage in the American educational system. Much of the disadvantage stems from the realization that many minorities use a variety of different linguistic systems than are used by the prevailing White middle-class teachers in the schools. While varying linguistic patterns constitute a major factor, there is evidence which clearly demonstrates that racial differences are not inseparable from linguistic differences. Such evidence implies that, regardless of the minority's language behavior, he/she will still be evaluated with less objectivity than a White counterpart. This paper will focus on an examination of the attitudes that undergraduate White students have concerning users of Black English.

Importance of the Study: A substantial number of the undergraduate students who participated in this study were enrolled in the College of Education. They will eventually be actively involved in society or classrooms in the American educational system. The attitudes they hold stand little opportunity of being at least broadened if not changed through the present educational curriculum at Bowling Green State University. To the writers'

knowledge, there is little specific information which exposes the potential classroom teacher to the varying linguistic styles of minority children.

There is a preponderance of evidence demonstrating that these same children are disadvantaged economically and socially, as well as educationally. This means that the use of nonstandard speech also has an impact on the future employment potential of present students.

Bowling Green State University has 561 Black students enrolled, of which a significant number use Black English. Presently, there is no specific research available at Bowling Green State University which demonstrates the relationship between the use of Black English and the attitudes White students have regarding users of Black English. It is important to study this relationship because the use of Black English has historically penalized twelve percent of the population--those who are black, whether they use Black English or not. Should this study demonstrate that the use of Black English has an adverse effect educationally, economically, and/or socially on a proportion of students at Bowling Green State University, such evidence might justify the establishment of curricula which addresses the problem.

The next section on Review of Literature indicates studies relating the use of nonstandard speech behavior with social and economic disadvantage in general, and educational disadvantage in particular.

Review of the Literature

Researchers are demonstrating the impact of the use of Black English on the educational, economical, and sociological development of its speakers. The impact has, for the most part, been a devastatingly adverse one, beginning at the very earliest ages. Recent literature has been copious in terms of

how the use of Black English has had its effect in all aspects of minority students' lives; however, the greatest impact has unquestionably been in the schools. One reason, of course, is that school attendance is mandatory and begins at an early age. If Black children had sufficient time and opportunity to build needed self-esteem before encountering a major negative force in their lives, the educational system would not have such a deleterious effect. But such is not the case, as school begins at age five. Socialization also begins early, but in that matter, there are choices and limitations.

A major concern stressed through the literature was the tendency for educators to assume a negative attitude toward lower socio-economic status students even in the absence of their use of Black English. Practitioners and researchers have implied that teacher behavior and attitudes are a function of the race and/or gender of the learner (14). A study by Washington compared Black and White teachers' distribution of positive and negative characteristics to Black Boys, Black Girls, White Boys, and White Girls. Results indicated that White Girls were perceived positively in proportions which greatly exceeded their representation among all designations by both Black and White teachers. It has been conjectured that White Girls receive more positive designations because of their status similarity to the "teacher establishment" (White female teachers).

Black teachers are highly critical of black students, according to one selected study (14). The rationale possibly relates to the desire on the part of Black teachers to prepare these students for the emotional realities of being rejected. Schooling rewards neatness, conformity, attitudes and language behaviors that are culturally defined by the White middle-class female--regardless of race or gender of the person in the establishment role. There

seems no question that teachers of middle-class values tend to give preferential treatment to the middle and upper socio-economic class pupils, while withholding rewards from pupils who belong to the lower socio-economic class. Wofford (19), substantiates this by saying that attitudes are least positive toward low-income Black children, and again, he reinforces the notion that Black teachers share the same bias.

With the existing pervasive attitudes of prejudice against minority children generally, and black children specifically and in particular, it seems little wonder that by the time the children reach adolescence, many experience problems with low self-esteem and self-confidence. For those who are doubly affected by being from low-income family backgrounds and speaking Black English, comes a third problem, mentioned earlier. The problem involves the lack of separation between one's dialect and one's intellect. This lack of separation was really the thrust on which this study was based.

The nonstandard speech of Black children not only affects teachers' attitudes and teacher-pupil relationships, it also has an adverse effect on peer relationships for Black children in educational programs. Teachers make initial assumptions that Black English speakers are substandard intellectually. One study showed that fifty percent of teachers interviewed felt that "Negroes," being inherently inferior in intelligence, cannot be expected to learn (19). It has been shown that teachers possess attitudes that impede the learning process and academic achievement of the inner-city child. Their attitudes reflect racial and social class bias which alienates the child, thus precluding any meaningful participation in the instructional process.

The assertion has been made that conventional English was not the language of metropolitan Blacks, and that Black children were at a disadvantage culturally

by its use in the schools. Further, the language of immigrants and Blacks, being different from conventional English, were regarded as inferior, and were thought to represent inferior thought patterns. While the problem starts at an early age, it persists throughout the later educational years. A study by J. Williams (16) involved Black students' and White students' perceptions of their academic performance in college communication skills classes. The results showed a significant reduction in the Black students' self-esteem when they were required to compare their performance with White counterparts.

The subject of the use of standardized intelligence tests on minority populations need not be treated in this paper, however, mention will be made of the use of standardized language tests. Like the intelligence tests, they too were intended for the populations from which the normative data came--White middle-class children. Black children have frequently been labeled as language deficient because of their language difference. They were usually confronted with a linguistic system similar to their own environs, but different enough to cause depressed (or depressing) language scores. Upon further examination and observation of Black childrens' verbal behavior, it was found that Black children have developed unique verbal skills that are neither measured by conventional tests nor accepted in the White middle-class oriented classroom (2).

Most educators are convinced that speakers of Black English will eventually need to acquire the standard speech pattern, and the sooner the better. A study by Forster (4) explains the federal government's role in facilitating the process in a school system. The Cleveland Heights-University Heights City School District, a suburban school system adjacent to the city of Cleveland, demonstrated the need for a language intervention program to address problems

related to the use of nonstandard English by its Black students. The school system found that following desegregation, there was significant interference with the learning process due to the absence of skill in the manipulation of standard English which was penalizing Black students, both educationally and vocationally. The answer or method of addressing these concerns has been to establish Language Intervention Programs which seek to assimilate the standard English dialect into the speech patterns of Black children at an early age. Geiger and Greenberg (5) state a common rationale for language intervention programs that includes enabling Black students to avoid the ostracism often associated with Black English by standard English speakers who could ultimately control employment, and they feel that learning standard English facilitates learning to read standard English. Many similar programs have been established throughout the country with similar rationales.

A past problem that hindered the education of nonstandard speakers was that they were often diagnosed by experts as being substandard speakers. Speech clinicians have only recently become aware of the difference between speech dialect and speech defect. Studies such as the one by Hemingway (6) in 1981 are demonstrating the importance of the clinician being trained to accurately diagnose the speech patterns of Black children. Hemingway's study differentiated between Black children who spoke standard English, those who spoke Black English Vernacular, and those with true language pathology.

These studies definitely point out the fact that acquisition of standard speech patterns is inevitable if minorities intend to assimilate into even the fringes of society's mainstream. While Black children do need to acquire standard English, it must be pointed out that the reason is not so much to enable intelligible communication. Rather, it is needed for the sole purpose

of economic, social, and academic success when functioning outside the Black culture.

Economically, the attitudes of Caucasians who speak standard English toward nonstandard English speakers cannot be separated from their attitudes toward non-Caucasian people generally. This attitude becomes a pervasive one when it comes to job opportunities to the frustrating degree that it does educationally. It would indeed require a separate paper to document even partially the research done which indicates the relationship between the use of nonstandard speech patterns and the denial of job opportunities. However, to emphasize a point, a few studies will be cited. Hooper and Naremore (7) have found that employers' statements that nonstandard speech makes nonwhite job applicants bad risks reinforces the relationship between dialect and job opportunities. Terrell and Terrell (12) cite the real crux of the problem in terms of economics. Without detailing their study, these researchers found that Black English speakers are offered fewer jobs than standard English speakers. Additionally, they found that interviewees who spoke Black English were given shorter interviews and fewer job offers than interviewees who spoke standard English.

This section on the Review of the Literature is not meant to be exhaustive. The intent is to relay information on research regarding the relationship between the attitudes of standard English speaking educators and some employers (who are usually White) and users of nonstandard speech. The information tends to support the contention that speakers of Black English are at an educational, economic, and/or social disadvantage relative to speakers of standard English.

The next section on Procedure explains how the present study was carried out with the participation of forty-six undergraduate students, most of whom were enrolled in the College of Education at Bowling Green State University.

Procedure

Two undergraduate student classes were asked to respond to ten statements on a semantic differential. Both student groups were enrolled in Communication Disorders 223 - Introduction to Communication Disorders. Neither class could be considered sophisticated in terms of understanding the linguistic structure of Black English. Each class was presented with a taped recording of the "My Grandfather" passage, after which they immediately responded to the semantic differential. One class listened to the "My Grandfather" passage read by a Black English speaker while the other class responded to the same passage read by a standard English speaker. The "My Grandfather" passage was selected for two reasons: 1) It includes all the English phonemes, as well as a representative sample of commonly misarticulated phonemes; and, 2) It provides consistency between the two speakers. The passage reads as follows:

My Grandfather

You wish to know about my grandfather. Well, he is nearly ninety-three years old; he dresses himself in an ancient black frockcoat, usually minus several buttons; yet he still thinks as swiftly as ever. A long, flowing beard clings to his chin, giving those who observe him a pronounced feeling of the utmost respect. When he speaks, his voice is just a bit cracked and quivers a trifle. Twice each day he plays skillfully and with zest upon our small organ. Except in the winter when the ooze or ice or snow prevents, he slowly takes a short walk in the open air each day. We have often urged him to walk more and smoke less, but he always answers, "Banana Oil!" Grandfather likes to be modern in his language.

The criteria employed to determine the Black English speaker's use of Black English was the criteria established by Baratz (1). The criteria to determine the Standard English speaker's use of Standard English was a consensus of opinion of five Speech-Language Clinicians. The Standard English speaker's tape recorded speech was randomly placed among four other Standard English speakers' recorded speech. None of the Speech-Language Clinicians identified the speech as being different than the other four samples. All five samples were associated linguistically with standard speech in terms of phonological, morphological, and semantic features.

A semantic differential scale was devised by the investigator. It was composed of ten statements which alluded to the speaker's educational, professional, economic, and social credibility. Each of the forty-six students, twenty-three from each class, responded to the scale. The procedure for administering the scale was as follows: 1) The Semantic Differential was passed out face down to each class. Students were instructed to leave the paper face down until after they had heard the tapes; 2) The tapes were played--the Standard sample in one class and the Nonstandard sample in the other; 3) Upon completion of the tapes, students were instructed to turn their papers over and respond to the Semantic Differential Scale (Figure 1).

A value was assigned to each of the seven points on the semantic scale, with a value of (1) being assigned to the negative end of the scale and (7) to the positive end. Accordingly, a maximum of 161 points (23 times 7) were possible for each of the ten statements on the scale. Each speaker's total points were tallied for each of the ten statements. A percentage score was calculated which represented the portion of positive points accorded each speaker for each of the ten statements.

PLEASE PLACE AN (X) ON THE LINE THAT, IN YOUR OPINION, MOST APPROPRIATELY FITS THE STATEMENTS.

1. The speaker is an intelligent person.

Strongly Disagree ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ Strongly Agree

2. The speaker is professionally capable.

Strongly Disagree ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ Strongly Agree

3. The speaker would be acceptable in my social circle.

Strongly Disagree ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ Strongly Agree

4. The speaker would be desirable as my child's teacher.

Strongly Disagree ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ Strongly Agree

5. The speaker will be frequently promoted.

Strongly Disagree ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ Strongly Agree

6. The speaker will make a valuable contribution to society.

Strongly Disagree ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ Strongly Agree

7. The speaker would be a good salesperson.

Strongly Disagree ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ Strongly Agree

8. The speaker is well-educated.

Strongly Disagree ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ Strongly Agree

9. The speaker would get my vote in a political campaign.

Strongly Disagree ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ Strongly Agree

10. The speaker is highly employable.

Strongly Disagree ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ Strongly Agree

The 46 student participants were between 18 and 22 years of age; 17 were freshman, 14 were sophomores, 11 were juniors, and 4 were seniors. Colleges represented included 26 from the College of Education, 11 from the College of Arts and Sciences, 7 from the College of Health and Community Services, and 2 from the College of Business Administration.

The next section on Results and Discussion details the findings of this study.

Results and Discussion

Results of the study indicate that the Standard English speaker scored higher on all ten statements on the semantic differential than did the Nonstandard speaker. On the first statement, "The speaker is an intelligent person," the Standard speaker (Ss) received 125 points, or 77% of the maximum number of 161 points, while the Nonstandard speaker (Ns) received 84 points, or 52%. The results were similar on the second and third statements, "The speaker is professionally capable" and "The speaker would be acceptable in my social circle," respectively. (See Figure 2) The fourth statement, "The speaker would be desirable as my child's teacher," showed the greatest difference, 50 percentage points between speakers. The average percentage difference between speakers was 29.2%. The Ss received 122 points or 76%, while the Ns had 42 points for 26%. It is also the statement on which the Ns received the lowest score--26% or 42 out of 161 points. This result strongly reinforces what has already been reported in the literature--namely, that most teachers who are standard English speakers prefer similar speaking behavior from their children or students. One must also consider the fact that more than half, 56.5%, of the respondents in this study came from the College of Education. The next statement, "The speaker will be frequently

FIGURE 2

Percent of Positive Responses From

Standard and Nonstandard English Speakers

promoted," scored 68% and 37% by the Ss and Ns, respectively. The 68% represents one of the lowest scores the Ss received along with the score of 67% in response to "The speaker will make a valuable contribution to society." On this statement, the Ns scored the highest for all Ns scores--53% or 86 out of 161. It was also the statement which had the closest scores between the two speakers--a difference of only 14 percentage points (53% and 67%). "The speaker would be a good salesperson" scored 72% for the Ss, which is the exact average percent of all Ss scores. The Ns score was 38%, slightly lower than the Ns average percentage score of 42.6. Eighty-three percent was the highest score the Ss received, in response to "The speaker is well-educated." It could be assumed, based on data derived from these students, that the use of Standard English relates significantly to being well-educated. On the next statement, "The speaker would get my vote in a political campaign," the scores were low for both speakers, and it was the lowest score received by the SS, 55% or 89 out of 161. The 55 represents a percentage score far below the average percentage of 72 for all Ss scores. Scores on the last statement, "The speaker is highly employable," were 70% and 45% for the Ss and Ns, respectively. Seventy represents a lower than average percentage score for the Ss, while 45 is a higher than average score for the Ns.

It is hoped that this study points out the need for a broader understanding, if not acceptance of, language behavior different than one's own. The

prevailing pattern of behavior exhibited in the nation's classrooms leaves little doubt that much change will occur without intervention programs which take different aim. Presently, intervention programs direct efforts at the victims which exacerbates feelings of low self-esteem and self-confidence. A more appropriate tactic may be to exert some efforts toward re-thinking at the levels where future teachers are being trained--the Universities. As stated in this paper, educators are aware of the necessity for the establishment of intervention programs aimed at assimilating nonstandard speakers into the mainstream; however, the process may be hastened if the educators had a deeper knowledge of the intricacies of language and linguistic variation. With added knowledge may come the lessening of negative attitudes directed toward users of Nonstandard English.

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